Potential

Isaac Asimov

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Potential

Nadine Triomph checked the long list of symbols for-what was it?-the tenth time. She did not think she could get anything out of it that Multivac had not, but it was only human to try.

She passed it over to Basil Seversky. “It's completely different, Basil,” she said.

“You can see that at a glance,” said Basil, gloomily.

“Well, don't drag. That's good. So far the only gene combinations that Multivac has dredged up seem to have been minor variations on a theme. Now this one is different.”

Basil put his hands into the pockets of his lab jacket and leaned his chair back against the wall. He felt the line of his hips absently and noted it was gaining a certain softness. He was getting pudgy all over, he thought, and didn't like it.

He said, “Multivac doesn't tell us anything we don't tell it first. We don't really know that the basic requirements for telepathy are valid, do we?”

Nadine felt defensive. It was Basil who had worked out the neurological requirements, but it was she who had prepared the program by which Multivac scanned the potential gene structures to see which might produce those requirements.

She said, “If we have two rather different sets of genetic patterns, as we now have, we can work out-or try to work out-the common factors, and this could give us a lead as to the validity.”

“In theory-but we'll be working in theory forever. If Multivac works at its present speed for the remaining lifetime of the sun as a main-sequence star, it will not have gone through a duodecillionth of all the possible structural variations of the genes that might exist, let alone the possible modifications introduced by their order on the chromosomes.”

“We might get lucky.” They had held the same conversation-upbeat versus downbeat-a dozen times, with minor variations in detail.

“Lucky? The word hasn't been invented to describe the kind of impossible luck we would need. And if we do pick out a million different genetic patterns with potential for telepathy, we then have to ask what the odds are that someone now alive will have such a gene pattern, or anything near it.”

"We can modify," said Nadine.

"Oh? Have you come across an existing human genetic pattern which can be modified by known procedures into something Multivac says will produce telepathy?"

"The procedures will improve in the future and if we keep Multivac working and keep on registering all human genetic patterns at birth-"

"-*And*," Basil continued sing-song, "if the Planetary Genetic Council continues to support the program adequately, *and* if we continue to get the time-sharing we need on Multivac, *and* if-"

It was at that point that Multivac interrupted with one more item and all a dazed Basil could say afterward was, "I don't believe it."

* * *

It seemed that Multivac's routine scanning of registered genetic patterns of living human beings had turned up one that matched the new pattern it had worked out as possessing telepathic potential-and the match was virtually exact.

Basil said, "I don't believe it."

Nadine, who had always been forced into unreasoning faith by Basil's consistent pessimism, said, sunnily. "Here he is, just the same. Male. Aged 15. Name Roland Washman. Only child. Plainview, Iowa. American Region, actually."

Basil studied Roland's genetic pattern, as delivered by Multivac, and compared it with the pattern worked out by Multivac from theoretical considerations. He muttered, again, "I don't believe it."

"It's there before you."

"Do you know the odds against this?"

"It's there before you. The Universe is billions of years old and there's been time for a great many unbelievable coincidences to happen."

"Not this unbelievable." Basil pulled himself together. "Iowa was included in one of the areas we scanned for telepathic presence and nothing ever showed up. Of course, the pattern only shows the *potential* for telepathy-"

* * *

It was Basil's plan to approach indirectly. However much the Planetary Genetic Council might post the possibility of telepathy as one of the goal-patterns to be searched for, along with musical genius, variable-gravitational endurance, cancer resistance, mathematical intuition, and several hundred other items, it remained that telepathy had an ingrained unpopularity.

However exciting the thought of "reading minds" might seem in the abstract, there was always an uneasy resistance to the thought of having one's mind read. Thought was the unassailable bastion of privacy, and it would not be surrendered without a struggle. Any controvertible claim to have discovered telepathy would, therefore, be surely controverted.

Basil, therefore, overrode Nadine's willingness to move straight to the point and to interview the young man directly, by making that very point.

"Oh, yes," he grumbled, "and we will let our eagerness lure us into announcing we have found a telepath so that the PGC will put half a dozen authorities on his track in order to disprove the claim and ruin our scientific careers. Let's find out all we can about him *first*."

The disappointed Nadine consoled herself with the obvious fact that in a computerized society, every human being left tracks of all kinds from the moment of conception, and that it could all be recovered without much trouble, and even quickly.

"Umm," said Basil, "not very bright in school."

"It could be a good sign," said Nadine. "Telepathic ability would surely take up a sizable fraction of the higher functioning of the brain and leave little over for abstract thought. That might explain why telepathy had not evolved more noticeably in the human species. The disadvantages of low intelligence would be contra-survival."

"He's not exactly an *idiot savante*. Dull-normal."

"Which might be exactly right."

"Rather withdrawn. Doesn't make friends easily. Rather a loner."

Nadine said, excitedly. "*Exactly* right. Any early evidence of telepathic ability would frighten, upset, and antagonize people. A youngster lacking judgement would innocently expose the motives of others in his group and be beaten up for his pains. Naturally, he would withdraw into himself."

Data was gathered for a long time, thereafter, and Basil said, finally. "Nothing! There's nothing known about him; no reports, not one, that indicates anything that can be twisted into a sign of telepathy. There's not even any comment to the effect that he's 'peculiar.' He's almost disregarded."

"*Absolutely* right. The reaction of others forced him, early on, to

hide all telepathic ability, and that same telepathic ability guided his behavior so as to avoid all unfavorable notice. It's remarkable how it fits."

Basil stared at her with disfavor. "You can twist anything into supporting your romantic view of this. Look! He's fifteen and that's too old. Let's suppose he was born with a certain amount of telepathic ability and that he learned early not to display it. Surely the talent would have atrophied and be entirely gone by now. That has to be so for if he remained a full telepath, he couldn't possibly have avoided displaying it now and then, and that would have attracted attention."

"No, Basil. At school, he's by himself and does as little work as possible-"

"He's not scapegoated, as he would be if he were a telepathic little wise-guy."

"I told you! He knows when he would be and avoids it. Summers he works as a gardener's assistant and, again, doesn't encounter the public."

"He encounters the gardener, and yet he keeps the job. It's his third summer there right now, and if he were a telepath, the gardener would get rid of him. No, it's close-but no cigar. It's too late. What we need is a new-born child with that same genetic pattern. Then we might have something-*maybe*."

Nadine rumpled her fading blonde hair and looked exasperated. "You're deliberately trying to avoid tackling the problem by denying it exists. Why don't we interview the gardener? If you're willing to go to Iowa-I tell you what, I'll pay for the plane fare, and you won't have to charge it to the project, if that's what's bothering you."

Basil held up his hand. "No, no, the project will bear it, but I tell you what. If we find no signs of telepathic ability, and we won't, you'll owe me one fancy dinner at a restaurant of my choice."

"Done," said Nadine, eagerly, "and you can even bring your wife."

"You'll lose."

"I don't care. Just so we don't abandon the matter too soon."

* * *

The gardener was by no means enthusiastically cooperative. He viewed the two as government officials and did not approve of them for that reason. When they identified themselves as scientists, that was no better ground for approval. And when they asked after Roland, he

neared the point of outright hostility.

"What do you want to know about Roland for? Done anything?"

"No, no," said Nadine, as winningly as she might. "He might qualify for special schooling, that's all."

"What kind of schooling? Gardening?"

"We're not sure."

"Gardening's all he's good for, but he's good at that. Best I've ever had. He doesn't need no schooling in gardening."

Nadine looked about appreciatively at the greenhouse and at the neat rows of plants outside as well. "He does all that?"

"Have to admit it," said the gardener. "Never this good without him. But it's all he's good for."

Basil said, "Why is that all he's good for, sir?"

"He's not very bright. But he's got this talent. He'll make anything grow."

"Is he odd in any way?"

"What do you mean, odd?"

"Funny? Peculiar? Strange?"

"Being that good a gardener is strange, but I don't complain."

"Nothing else?"

"No. What are you looking for, mister?"

Basil said, "I really don't know."

* * *

That evening, Nadine said, "We've got to study the boy."

"Why? What have you heard that gives you any hope?"

"Suppose you're right. Suppose it's all atrophied. Still, we might find a *trace* of the ability."

"What would we do with a trace? Small effects would not be convincing. We have had a full century of experience with that, from Rhine onward."

"Even if we don't get anything that would prove anything to the world, so what? What about *ourselves*? The important thing is that we'd satisfy ourselves that when Multivac says a particular genetic pattern has the potential for telepathy, it's right. And if it's right, that would mean your theoretical analysis-and my programming, too-was right. Don't you want to put your theories to the test and find confirmatory evidence? Or are you afraid you won't."

"I'm not afraid of that. I *am* afraid of wasting time."

"One test is all I ask. Look, we ought to see his parents anyway,

for whatever they can tell us. After all, they knew him when he was a baby and had, in full, whatever telepathic powers he might have had to begin with-and then we'll get permission to have him match random numbers. If he fails that, we go no further. We waste no more time."

* * *

Roland's parents were stolid and totally non-informative. They seemed as slow as Roland was reported to be, and as self-contained.

There had been nothing odd about their son as a baby, they said. They repeated that without guilty over-emphasis. Strong and healthy, they said, and a hard-working boy who earned good money over the summer and went to high-school the rest of the year. Never in any trouble with the law or in any other way.

"Might we test him?" asked Nadine. "A simple test?"

"What for?" asked Washman. "I don't want him bothered."

"Government survey. We're choosing fifteen-year-old boys here and there so we can study ways to improve methods of schooling."

Washman shook his head. "I don't want my boy bothered."

"Well," said Nadine, "you must understand there's two hundred fifty dollars to the family for each boy tested." (She carefully avoided looking at Basil, certain that his lips would have tightened in anger.)

"Two hundred fifty dollars?"

"Yes," said Nadine, trying hard. "After all, the test takes time and it's only fair the government pay for the time and trouble."

Washman cast a slow glance at his wife and she nodded. He said, "if the boy is willing, I guess it would be okay."

* * *

Roland Washman was tall for his age and well-built, but there seemed no danger in his muscles. He had a gentle way about him, and dark, quiet eyes looked out of his well-browned face.

He said, "What am I supposed to do, mister?"

"It's very easy," said Basil. "You have a little joy-stick with the numbers 0 to 9 on it. Every time, that little red light goes on, you push one of the numbers."

“Which one, mister?”

“Whichever one you want. Just one number and the light will go out. Then when it goes on, another number, and so on, until the light stops shining. This lady will do the same thing. You and I will sit opposite each other at this table, and she will sit at this other little table with her back to us. I don't want you to think about what number you're going to push.”

“How can I do it without thinking, mister? You got to think.”

“You may just have a feeling. The light goes on, and it might seem as though you have a feeling to push an 8, or a 6, or whatever. Just do it, then. One time you might push a 2, next time a 3, next time a 9 or maybe another 2. Whatever you want.”

Roland thought about it a bit, then nodded. “I'll try, mister, but I hope it don't take too long, because I don't see the sense of it.”

* * *

Basil adjusted the sensor in his left ear-canal unobtrusively and then gazed at Roland as benignly as he could.

The tiny voice in his left ear breathed, “Seven,” and Basil thought: Seven.

And the light flashed on Roland's joystick, and on Nadine's similar joystick and both pushed a number.

It went on and on: 6, 2, 2, 0, 4, 3, 6, 8…

And finally Basil said, “That's enough, Roland.”

They gave Roland's father five fifty-dollar bills, and they left.

* * *

In their motel room, Basil leaned back, disappointment fighting with the satisfaction of I-told-you-so.

“Absolutely nothing,” he said. “Zero correlation. The computer generated a series of random numbers and so did Roland, and the two did not match. He picked up absolutely nothing from my thought processes.”

“Suppose,” said Nadine, with a dying hope, “he could read your mind but was deliberately masking that fact.”

Basil said, “You know better than that. If he were trying to be

wrong on purpose, he would almost certainly be *too* wrong. He would match me less often than chance would dictate. Besides, you were generating a series of numbers too, and you couldn't read my thoughts either, and he couldn't read yours. He had two sets of different numbers assailing him each time, and there was zero correlation-neither positive *nor* negative with either. That can't be faked. We have to accept it, he doesn't have it, now, and we're out of luck. We'll have to keep looking, and the odds of coming across anything like this again-"

He looked hopeless.

* * *

Roland was in the front yard, watching after Basil and Nadine, as their car drove off in the bright sunlight.

He had been frightened. First they had talked to his boss, then to his parents, and he thought that they must have found out.

How could they have found out? It was impossible to find out, but why else were they so curious?

He had worried about all that business of picking numbers, even though he didn't see how it could do any harm. Then it came to him that they thought he could hear human voices in his mind. They were trying to think the right numbers at him.

They couldn't do that. How could he know what *they* were thinking? He couldn't ever tell what people were thinking. He knew that for certain. Couldn't ever!

He laughed a little to himself, very quietly. People always thought it was only people that counted.

And then came the little voice in his mind, very thin and very shrill.

"When-When-When-?"

Roland turned his head. He knew it was a bee winging toward him. He wasn't hearing the bee, but the whole mind of the whole hive.

All his life he had heard the bees thinking, and they could hear him. It was wonderful. They pollinated his plants and they avoided eating them, so that everything he touched grew beautifully.

The only thing was they wanted more. They wanted a leader; someone to tell them how to beat back the push of humanity. Roland wondered how that could be done. The bees weren't enough but suppose he had all the animals. Suppose he learned how to blend minds with all of them. Could he?

The bees were easy, and the ants. Their minds built up in large crowds. And he could hear the crows now. He didn't used to. And he was beginning to make out something with the cattle, though they weren't worth listening to, hardly.

Cats? Dogs? All the bugs and birds?

What could be done? How far could he go?

A teacher had once said to him that he didn't live up to his potential.

“When-When-When-?” thought the bee.

“Not yet-Not yet-Not yet-” thought Roland.

First, he had to reach his potential.